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Obesity, Diabetes and Other Adverse Health Trends: What Role are Synthetic and Industrialized Additives in the U.S. Food Supply Playing?

The surge in chronic health conditions in recent years, especially conditions such as obesity, diabetes, autoimmune disorders, heart disease and digestive disorders have caused a number of researchers to begin closely examining factors associated with the U.S. diet in the search for possible culprits. Key factors under scrutiny are synthetic and industrialized food additives¹ including synthetic food dyes, preservatives, pesticides, industrial food packaging chemicals that leach into the food, anti-caking agents, antimicrobials, antioxidants, emulsifiers, thickening agents, flavor enhancers, and other additives commonly used in processed foods. Over the course of the past several decades food additives have been linked in scientific and medical studies as well as clinical trials to a myriad of serious health conditions including heart disease, insulin resistance/impaired glucose tolerance and diabetes, weight gain/obesity, depression, lethargy, cognition problems including memory and concentration difficulties, behavioral, mood and psychiatric disorders, insomnia/sleep disturbances, attention deficit disorder, hyperactivity, nausea, fatigue, ear infections, swollen lymph nodes, urticaria,

edema, allergic reactions including contact dermatitis, intestinal disturbances and digestive disorders, respiratory problems and asthma-related difficulties, increased incidence of tumors including fibroid tumors, prostate and breast cancer, endocrine dysfunction, infertility, nasal polyps, rhinitis, autoimmune complications and disorders, migraine headaches, liver and kidney complications, and more. These conditions can have a dramatic impact on quality of life and as such even the possibility of food additives as the antecedents needs to be considered carefully.

There are currently many thousands of synthetic and industrialized chemicals that have worked their way into the U.S. food supply—a large percentage of which have never been scientifically safety tested, and according to recent research findings, many of which the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the main governmental oversight body for food safety, is not even aware of. Many of these additives are used as dyes, stabilizers, emulsifiers, buffering agents, flavor and color enhancers, and preservatives in processed foods. The estimated 10,000 chemicals (and more entering the food supply each year) also include pesticides, phthalates, synthetic growth hormones, antibiotics (in 2011 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration confirmed that in their 2009 data collection, animal agriculture consumed 80 percent of all antibiotics in the United States, with a large percentage of those antibiotics used to artificially promote growth—and profits for Big Ag and others), as well as a host of other potentially harmful substances and compounds (some of them known toxins and carcinogens) found in food packaging and known to migrate into the food. Taken together (this cumulative effect is something that many scientists warn may be particularly dangerous to human health) much of the processed food in the U.S. is swimming in something akin to a chemical stew.

A small sample of conditions linked with processed food additives

Diabetes and food chemicals: There are a number of common synthetic and industrialized food additives that have been linked in scientific studies to diabetes. Additionally, results from a recent groundbreaking study indicate that artificial sweeteners like Aspartame for example, may actually exacerbate, rather than prevent, metabolic disorders such as Type 2 diabetes. Findings from the scientific study have linked artificial sweeteners to increases in blood sugar levels and obesity—the two health conditions artificial sweeteners were originally intended to fight.

Other food additives that have been linked in scientific studies and clinical and consumer reports to triggering or worsening diabetes include carrageenan; pesticides, including the key ingredient used in pesticides and chemical bleaching agents to prevent food mold, chloride oxide; EDTA, a salt produced from synthesizing ethylenediamine, formaldehyde and sodium cyanide, used as a fortifier, texture enhancing agent, and food preservative and is commonly found in a wide variety of commercially-processed foods and restaurant foods. EDTA may worsen conditions for people with diabetes (as well as for individuals with asthma, heart rhythm problems, kidney disease, epilepsy, liver disease, hepatitis, tuberculosis, allergies, and electrolyte imbalance, including hypomagnesemia (low magnesium levels), hypocalcemia (low calcium levels) and hypokalemia (low potassium levels)); gelatin glutamate; nitrates/nitrites, a possible carcinogen, common in processed meats and linked with diabetes mellitus, as well as the formation of carcinogenic nitrosamines, bladder cancer, chronic liver disease, respiratory, skin and intestinal disturbances, and Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease; and synthetic phosphates such as calcium phosphate, potassium phosphate, sodium phosphate, among others, are thought to be potentially problematic for those people with health conditions placing kidney or cardiovascular health at risk such as those individuals with diabetes.

Industrial food packaging chemicals have been linked with the development of diabetes as well as a

host of other troubling health conditions. One such group of chemicals includes phthalates which have been shown to leach into the food supply and are potentially problematic because they are known endocrine disrupting chemicals. Scientific studies have linked phthalates to diabetes, breast cancer, obesity, asthma, brain development problems, and numerous endocrine abnormalities like triggering early menopause, premature breast development in girls, lowered hormones in men, damaged sperm, and premature births. Phthalates are found in processed food packaging, some commercial clear food wrap, and child lunchboxes, as well as plastic food storage containers, where they can leach into stored food. Food processing techniques can also cause high levels of phthalates in milk and dairy products (even organic versions) and commercial spices (including those labeled as ‘organic’), and at varying levels in all processed, packaged food items sold in grocery stores. A scientific study conducted in 2013 tested a random sample of food and drinks from grocery store shelves—researchers discovered some level of phthalates in every food product they sampled.

Another common industrialized food packaging chemical, bisphenol-A or BPA, is a reported endocrine-disrupting chemical and numerous peer-reviewed studies conducted by independent scientists and two recent studies funded by the National Institute of Health (NIH), have linked exposure to BPA to a variety of adverse health consequences including insulin resistance and diabetes, an increased risk for endocrine-related cancers including breast cancer and prostate cancer, spikes in blood pressure, heart disease, abnormalities in liver function, low sperm counts in men, metabolic abnormalities, weight gain, increased serum cholesterol levels, neurological damage/altered brain development including a link with schizophrenia, puberty advances, disruptions, and abnormalities, adverse reproductive and developmental effects including recurrent miscarriages, gynecomastia (a male breast disease that causes abnormal breast growth in boys and men), and perinatal exposure to BPA has recently been linked to an increased risk of food intolerance in adulthood.

Digestive Problems, Fibromyalgia and food chemicals: Scientific studies and clinical reports have suggested a link between MSG (an industrialized flavor enhancer) and Aspartame (a synthetic sweetener) and aggravation of Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) symptoms and fibromyalgia in adults. And clinical reports have revealed a spike in emergency ward visits for severe stomach pain and diagnoses of gastritis (inflammation of the stomach lining) and other digestive disorders from synthetic flavor enhancers and additives used in certain processed junk food. Just as disturbing, recent research findings have suggested that food additives Polysorbate 80 and Carboxymethylcellulose, commonly used as emulsifiers in processed food to promote texture and extend shelf life, can actually alter the gut microbiota composition and localization to induce intestinal inflammation that promotes the development of inflammatory bowel disease and metabolic syndrome. Researchers working on the study reported they were alarmed at the strength with which these additives appear to promote weight gain, intestinal inflammation, metabolic syndrome, colitis and Crohn's disease—serious illnesses that have spiked in the U.S. in recent years and have coincided with the food industry's increased use of emulsifiers. In addition to Polysorbate 80 and Carboxymethylcellulose/cellulose gum, clinical and consumer reports have revealed other commonly used food additives linked to digestive and gastrointestinal problems include carrageenan, maltodextrin, monosodium glutamate, autolyzed yeast extract, citric acid, disodium phosphate, sodium caseinate, disodium inosinate and disodium guanylate.

"We are living in an environment with sedentary lifestyles, poor-quality diet and highly processed foods that is very different from the one we are adapted to through human evolution. It is that difference that leads to many of the chronic diseases that we see today, such as obesity and diabetes."

~Dr. Aaron Blaisdell, Researcher

Weight gain/obesity and food chemicals: The increase in the number of scientific research studies investigating the link between synthetic food additives and weight gain/obesity—an epidemic occurring not only in the U.S., but worldwide—is a hopeful trend. Recent research findings have indicated a link between weight gain and processed food chemicals in both adults and children, and previous studies dating back decades linked additives like MSG with weight gain in laboratory animals. Some consumers are surprised to learn about the weight gain/obesity connection, but scientists have known for some time about the link between MSG and weight gain. In fact, one of the most widely used models to induce obesity in laboratory rats and mice is to administer food-grade monosodium glutamate. And despite food industry-sponsored study results calling the MSG-weight gain link into question, including those studies sponsored by the MSG industry themselves, a number of studies linking MSG with weight gain appear to support the position of The Glutamate Association, a government lobbying group comprised of corporations who use and produce MSG for foodstuffs. Their position is that eating foods containing MSG increases appetite and they have promoted the use of MSG for populations like the elderly who have difficulty gaining weight due to lowered appetites. The industrialized food additive monosodium glutamate (MSG) is commonly used as a flavor enhancer and is present in processed foods at the grocery store as well as conventional and fast food restaurants. Experts working in this area tell us that other additives that trigger the same chemical reaction in the body as MSG (such as autolyzed yeast, hydrolyzed protein, hydrolyzed vegetable protein, maltodextrin, calcium caseinate, and about a dozen others) may have the same effect as MSG does in some individuals. Despite the findings of numerous studies linking MSG with weight gain, increased appetite, and obesity, there remains no warning on labels stating this possibility on food products containing MSG—a factor which could potentially complicate a number of health-related issues connected to obesity for some consumers.

For those people whose unexplained weight gain comes on slowly and steadily sans changes in daily

calorie consumption or activity levels, the culprit may be a metabolic shift such as is currently being hypothesized by researchers studying what has been termed, “obesogens”, chemicals suspected of triggering obesity, for which there are several, one of which is pesticides and another is BPA—a synthetic estrogen chemical that has been shown to be an endocrine (hormonal) disruptor. Among other places like cash register and ATM receipts, plastic food storage containers, and dental fillings, BPA (Bisphenol-A) is commonly used on the inner linings of canned food and plastic drink containers where it has been found to migrate into the food and drinks. Research has demonstrated that BPA is an endocrine disrupter that may be a factor in infertility, certain cancers, immune disorders and obesity, among other serious health conditions. The effects of low doses of BPA, recent scientific research, including two studies funded by the National Institute of Health (NIH), have found links to male sexual dysfunction, diabetes, prostate and breast cancer, and weight gain/obesity.

“We are especially concerned about chemicals that affect hormonal activity, known as endocrine disrupting chemicals, or ECDs. These chemicals can lead to health effects later in life, like predisposition for obesity, diabetes, and cancer, and we don't know if there are safe exposure levels.”

~Research scientist Jane Muncke, Ph.D.

Another potential food chemical group responsible for weight gain and obesity is pesticides. An estimated 888 million pounds of pesticides are applied in the U.S. each year. Pesticides have been linked in scientific studies with obesity, cancers, neurotoxin effects (including impaired brain development and lowered IQ), endocrine, metabolic, and reproductive disorders, birth defects, learning and behavioral disorders in children, Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's disease. Like other synthetic

and industrialized food additives that have been linked with adverse health consequences, there is an absence of consumer warnings for high pesticide residues on or in certain foods such as produce, meat and dairy products, as well as processed foods that contain these items.

As obesity has been linked in scholarly scientific and medical studies with a host of serious health conditions such as diabetes, cancer, endocrine disorders, heart disease, and so on, we can only hope that researchers in this area push forward with their studies and that when more definitive answers come to light that the FDA actually responds on behalf of consumers and begins requiring warning labels on processed food and drinks containing the potentially pernicious additives. With more than half of American adults now overweight, and nearly one-third of the adult population (some 40 million people) defined as clinically obese, we are going to need to take considerably more proactive steps than just listing the calories on theater popcorn—and if anyone at the FDA is reading this, the sooner the better.

UTIs, Cancer, Asthma and food chemicals: You won't find the FDA acting as though they are very interested but scholarly scientific studies have linked synthetic additives in commercial (non-organic) chicken to recurrent, antibiotic-resistant urinary tract infections and synthetic additives in commercially processed meats to an increased incidence of cancer (including prostate) and early death. Other synthetic and industrialized food additives that have been linked with urinary tract and bladder infections (including interstitial cystitis (“painful bladder syndrome”), sensitive bladders, and frequent, recurring bladder infections or irregularities) include: Synthetic animal growth hormones (found in commercial, non-organic meats and poultry); Artificial sweeteners (found in a wide variety of processed foods); BHT (a preservative common in everything from breakfast cereals, to butter, to snack food); Calcium Propionate (the industrialized version is commonly used as a preservative in a wide

variety of processed foods); Nitrates/Nitrites (common in processed meats like bologna, bacon, hot dogs, etc.); Propionic Acid (*Ethyl Formic Acid; Propanoic Acid; Methyl Acetic Acid; Ethanecarboxylic Acid*) (commonly used as a preservative and flavoring agent in a variety of processed foods from milk and dairy products, to bread products, to processed meats, meats and poultry); Sodium Erythorbate (*Sodium Isoascorbate; Erythorbic Acid*) (found in canned fruit, fruit juices, processed meats and other processed foods); Sodium Propionate (*Salts and Esters of Propionic Acid*) (used as a preservative in a wide variety of processed foods). Other recent studies have linked processed food additives to an increased incidence of allergies in children and with triggering severe asthma, eczema, and rhinitis among children (27% increased risk) and teens (a 39% increased risk). Additional commonly found food additives linked with triggering asthma in children and adults include preservative sodium benzoate, flavor enhancer monosodium glutamate (MSG) and synthetic azo food dye Yellow 5 or Tartrazine.

This is your brain on synthetic food additives

Unfortunately, the results from recent scientific studies indicate that our brains may be as vulnerable to the adverse effects of synthetic and industrialized food additives as our bodies.

Compromised Intelligence and food chemicals: One recent large, longitudinal study of long-term health and well-being following 14,000 children suggests that processed foods in early childhood may actually lower IQ. The results showed that after taking into account possible mediating variables, a predominantly processed food diet at the age of 3 was associated with a lower IQ at the age of 8.5, irrespective of whether the diet improved after that initial age. Subjects were scored according to the

amount of processed foods they ingested each day. Every one point increase in the dietary pattern score for eating processed foods was associated with a 1.67 fall in IQ. As with other cognitive- and emotional-based factors, much more research is needed examining the scope of the role processed foods and their various additives may play in potential outcomes to cognitive and emotional well-being.

Memory Problems and food chemicals: A recent scholarly scientific study has now linked a widely used processed food additive to memory problems. Synthetic partially hydrogenated fats, a base ingredient for many processed foods, was found to adversely affect the memory of study participants. Young men in the study who had diets high in processed foods containing trans fats were found to perform measurably worse on memory tests than those who ate less processed foods with this common additive. More specifically, the researchers found that among men younger than 45, those who ate more trans fats showed notably worse performance on a standardized word memory test; this effect held true even after taking into account factors such as age, education, ethnicity and depression. Synthetic trans fats like partially hydrogenated oils are widely used in processed foods, fast food, baked goods, snack foods, frozen pizza and coffee creamers.

Depression and food chemicals: Research focusing on the link between processed food chemicals and depression is an area of great interest, especially considering the surprising number of people who report they have discovered on their own that the connection exist in their personal lives. One such recent study published in a peer-reviewed, scientific journal examined the potential link between processed food and depression. Researchers found that eating commercial baked goods (croissants, doughnuts, etc.) and fast food (hamburgers, hot dogs and pizza) is linked to depression. And the results suggest this link is a strong one. In fact, the researchers found that people who regularly eat fast food,

compared to those who eat little or none, are 51% more likely to develop depression. (A previous study found that diets of processed foods that have a high fat and high sugar content increase the likelihood of developing depression by a whopping 60 percent.) As other scientists studying the adverse effects of synthetic chemicals have found, when it comes to eating processed foods and depression, a dose-response relationship was observed. In other words, according to the researchers, the more fast food a person consumes, the greater the risk of depression.

Lethargy and food chemicals: Do the synthetic and industrialized food chemicals in junk food make people lazy? Another area of research having important real life implications is the link between processed junk food and lethargy. For years now, many people who have regularly eaten junk food talk about how doing so can make them not want to leave the sofa. These anecdotal reports about the effects of additives in processed junk food have finally been substantiated scientifically. More specifically, the study results indicate that consistently eating processed foods and being overweight can make people tired and inactive; this is contrary to some beliefs maintaining laziness leads to obesity. Though a considerable amount of research still needs to be conducted, the fact that a recent study has revealed a potential link between a long-term diet of junk food and lethargy highlights the potential adverse effects of processed foods containing synthetic and industrialized additives.

The onus is on consumers to avoid potentially harmful food additives

“The FDA has received thousands of consumer complaints about additives in recent years, saying certain substances seem to trigger asthmatic attacks, serious bouts of vomiting, intestinal tract disorders and other health problems.”
~Washington Post

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) cannot be counted on to assure that the food supply is safe for consumers. The reasons for this are varied and include what some experts have argued is a matter of regulatory capture where the FDA has been captured by the very industry they are in charge of regulating. A recent study conducted by Pew Charitable Trusts revealed that it has become commonplace for the big food manufacturers themselves, rather than the FDA, the regulatory body in charge of overseeing them, to decide what additives will enter the food supply. This has been made possible by a loophole in the approval process known as GRAS (Generally Recognized as Safe) which allows food manufacturers to dump additives into the U.S. food supply—sans the federally required safety testing. Here is a small sample of the findings:

- At least 78.4% of chemical additives directly added to processed food lack data for estimating overall safety levels for consumer exposure.
- Nearly two-thirds of chemical additives in the food supply lack basic feeding toxicology data to determine possible toxicity to consumers.
- Some 93% of synthetic and industrialized chemical additives in the food supply lack reproductive or developmental testing for determining potential risks to newborns and children.

The lack of safety testing for additives, along with the FDA’s refusal to respond to legal petitions to remove existing additives demonstrated in scientific and medical studies to be harmful to some

consumers or to require manufacturers to use warning labels when their foods contain problematic additives, has shifted the onus onto consumers to learn which food additives may be harmful for themselves or their family members. Those consumers who wish to avoid food additives either because the existing data indicates a potential for adverse health-related outcomes or because they or their family members have an existing health condition that could potentially worsen by ingesting certain synthetic or industrialized food chemicals must keep abreast of the current scientific literature, learn the additives to avoid, vigilantly read the ingredients of all food items prior to purchase, and avoid eating at conventional and fast food restaurants, cafeterias and catered events where full disclosure of all additives contained in the foods is usually unavailable.

And these days, questionable additives make an appearance everywhere. What many consumers may not have considered is that it's not just the snack foods and packaged meals that contain risky additives—unfortunately, processed food loaded with additives has also permeated even those sectors previously reserved for “health”. This includes questionable, potentially problematic additives in processed foods, food items and supplement drinks created for people with special diets like those with diabetes, gastrointestinal problems, autoimmune disorders, kidney, liver and heart-related conditions, and low-calorie foods recommended for people with obesity. This becomes particularly problematic when considering the number of food additives that have been linked in scholarly scientific and medical studies to these very health conditions. The same is true for processed food items marketed as, “health drinks”, “health bars”, “health supplements” and “health food” commonly targeted to those people who have a special interest and dedication to exercising and otherwise eating and living a healthy lifestyle—the irony is that a large percentage of these food items—as well as over the counter and prescription medicines and vitamins—are filled with synthetic and industrialized food chemicals, many of which have been linked with adverse health problems, some even for healthy, young adults.

Unfortunately, the link between synthetic and industrialized food chemicals and adverse health

reactions still goes largely unrecognized by the healthcare community. We urge the mainstream healthcare community to review the scientific research and clinical reports from within their own field so that we can begin the process of finally offering consumers much needed guidance for avoiding processed food additives linked with their health conditions as well as putting warnings labels on foods containing these chemicals of concern. In the meantime, all consumers must take it upon themselves to become educated about which synthetic and industrialized food additives may be posing harm or risk to themselves and their family members and to read the ingredients labels and avoid those additives.

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¹*Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act (FFDCA)* defines "food additive" to mean "any substance the intended use of which results or may reasonably be expected to result, directly or indirectly, in its becoming a component or otherwise affecting the characteristics of any food (including any substance intended for use in producing, manufacturing, packing, processing, preparing, treating, packaging, transporting, or holding food ...)." 21 U.S.C. §321(s).